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Educational Philosophy Paper

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*“If you have built castles in the air, your work need not be lost; that is where they should be. Now put the foundations under them.” –Thoreau*

As I embark on my final semester of coursework before student teaching, I realize that I am at a point in my educational career where I have much to reflect upon as well as much to look forward to. While reviewing on the background statement I wrote at the beginning of this semester, I realized that the beliefs I held four months ago have only been reinforced as I have become exposed to the details surrounding educational philosophies and theories. My personal experiences have helped me to identify with certain philosophies and theories with confidence, as well as have shaped who I am as an individual. Before I transferred to the University of Maine at Farmington in the fall of 2014, I had attended two other universities where I was able to discover what I truly wanted and didn’t want out of college. At Cornell University, I learned that large schools were not for me. I also learned that my plans of studying sustainable agriculture and my dream of someday “feeding the world” were not panning out in the way that I had hoped; I watched as many of the graduates within my program went on to work for big corporations like Monsanto, Cargill, and even Wal-Mart; furthermore, as my coursework progressed, I realized that my passion for agriculture was actually withering beneath the stress and competition associated with the program. I felt like I was losing touch with myself, and suddenly I didn’t know who or what I wanted to be anymore. After spending 13 miserable months at this Ivy League institution—one that I should have been “honored” to attend—I transferred to College of the Atlantic in Bar Harbor, Maine—student body: 350. My brief time (6 months) at COA allowed me to reconnect with myself, giving me the grounding that I needed after leaving Cornell in a frenzy of confusion and a deep sense of loss—loss for who I was and for what I wanted to do with my life.

Although I always said that I *never* wanted to be a teacher, simply because both of my parents have been teachers for years while I have acted as witness to their many trials and tribulations, my mother gave me some sound advice upon my leaving Cornell: she told me that there was no shame in being a teacher, and that for someone who enjoys working with people, particularly young people, and who has a goal of making positive impacts on a great many lives, going into education might be something worth considering. I decided to take some courses within the education program at COA, which focused on the human ecological aspects of schools and schooling, i.e., it placed great emphasis on the education of the “whole child” and learning as an experiential process. I was also able to take classes in sustainable agriculture at the same time, and it was at COA that I realized that I didn’t have to limit my interests. I started thinking outside of the box, considering ways in which I could tie my passion for agriculture and the environment into a classroom. I was introduced to integrated and student-centered curriculums, and supplemental educational programs that met my interests, such as Farm to School programs. It was at this point in my life that I realized schooling (whether as the student or the teacher) doesn’t have to black-and-white, and that it should be an ongoing journey of self-discovery for students and teachers alike. It was also with this realization that I knew this was the right career for me.

I believe that humans are born with the innate desire to be lifelong learners—that as a species, we are constantly seeking ways to push forward, discover new things, and live life to the fullest in our own unique ways. It is the teacher’s job to unearth this inner desire for learning. Teaching, in a way, is like agriculture: you plant the seeds, germinate them with the ideas and questions that will feed and foster their growth, care for them with tenderness, watch those seeds become seedlings, and finally, full-blown plants—vegetables, fruits, flowers—*whatever they want to be.* Growing up on a small farm, I was incredibly fascinated by the life cycle of a plant, and how something as small and as unassuming as a seed could become something so complex and beautiful as, say, a Howden pumpkin or a Mammoth sunflower. And finally, I was even more fascinated by how that Howden pumpkin or Mammoth sunflower had the potential to scatter it’s seeds and start the cycle all over again.

I’m not saying that my future students will be pumpkins and sunflowers. But I do know that every year, I will be given a mixed bag of seeds—I’ll never know what I’m going to get—and it will be my job to give those seeds what they need to grow on a individual level, and provide the supports they need along the way (tomatoes and beans need stakes and poles to climb, cucumbers and squash need plenty of mulch…) so that someday they can continue the cycle, that they will spread their own “seeds” of knowledge and curiosity, making the world a brighter, more compelling place. I want to give my students the means to continue their learning, to always stretch towards the sun, and to inspire others along the way.

I did not leave COA on a bitter note, and I did not come to Farmington reluctantly. COA helped me to discover my inner desire to teach, and Farmington has helped me elaborate on that desire through the in-depth and practical methods that I wanted to be exposed to in order to become to best teacher I can possibly be. I look at my transferring in this way: I carry little bits of each school I attended with me, and now have the ability to apply the unique experiences I gained over time to my current situation, making me a more well-rounded, open-minded individual. At UMF, I have been fortunate enough to delve into the practical methods of preparing to become a “caring teacher, a competent, educator, and a collaborative professional leader” (UMF Mission Statement for Teacher Education). My coursework has been rigorous and thought-provoking, and I could not feel more prepared to enter this career, both on a professional and on an individual level, thanks to my variety of experiences. Upon earning my degree from UMF, I will be certified to teach English in the secondary grades. Some people have asked me, “why English?” for I have expressed so much interest in agriculture and environmental sciences in the past. My answer is simple: I have multiple passions. Reading and writing have always been my strength, and there is nothing I love more than curling up with a good book, or sitting down to put my thoughts and emotions into words. Reading and writing are not only important areas of academia, they are also important for the soul, just like pulling weeds can be. As someone who deeply believes in the power of integrated curriculums and experiential learning, my ultimate hope and dream is to be able to “teach” sustainable methods (while instilling within my students a respect for the natural world) into an English/language arts curriculum. We can learn so much from the world around us, and it doesn’t always have to be through scientific methods. I believe that art—in its broadest sense—can be found in anything, and that it is art that allows us to attach meaning to our experiences. The possibilities for learning are endless when students are given opportunities to combine hands-on activities through integrated units that give them the power to derive meaning from their educational experiences. Education should not be compartmentalized if we as teachers are to foster lifelong learning, so it is our job to do everything we can to design learning experiences that are cross-disciplinary and applicable to real-world situations.

Of course, I understand that my ability to turn my dreams into reality is highly dependent on the conditions under which I am hired as a professional and the educational philosophies that my future school district will embody. However, I am fortunate enough to have a strong sense of what I am looking to achieve as an educator, and I will do my best to seek a school environment that best supports my personal beliefs. Similarly, I understand that not all of my students will share the same passions and interests as I do, and it will be my job to broaden my horizons by designing units and activities that meet *their* best interests. Fortunately, I am confident that I can apply my overarching philosophies of education to meet the needs of many diverse learners, as my personal educational philosophies mirror those of pragmatism and existentialism. Essentially, I believe that the purpose of learning is to help students develop a personal identity that gives them a sense of direction and meaning in life (existentialism) while simultaneously preparing them to function within and contribute to a dynamic and changing world (pragmatism). Certain components of existentialism ought to have a place in schools, particularly those that include offering greater opportunities for student choice and self-discovery. I believe that the more comfortable an individual is with him/her self, the more likely he/she will find direction and meaning in life, and the more open to learning he/she will become. In order for students to have the well-rounded education that I believe will carry the most weight throughout their lives, components of pragmatism ought to be paired with those of existentialism. Pragmatic ideals reminds us that nothing in life is static, and that change is constantly happening all around us. It is important to remember that even the person within us, whom we discover through the practices of existentialism, is subject to change. Pragmatism prepares students to adapt to change, problem-solve, and apply their knowledge to real-world situations—all of which are essential for becoming highly functioning members of society.

The fact that I identify most with the ideals of pragmatism and existentialism, however, does not mean that I cannot derive any value from the philosophies of idealism and realism. For example, I believe that it is important for students to learn about historical events and people (idealism) and to be able to think rationally (realism), but more so in the sense that they can use such knowledge to better understand themselves and the world around them rather than as “sole” bases for learning. It is the dynamic and interdisciplinary principles of pragmatism and existentialism that I believe are necessary for developing the motivated, self-fulfilled, open-minded individuals who will ultimately lead us to the future our world is waiting for.

In terms of the theories surrounding education, I have come to the conclusion that a combination of constructivism and humanism best reflect my personal beliefs.  I do not think that I could strictly adhere to one theory or the other, however, because I believe that a meaningful, well-rounded education occurs when the individual is able to form a genuine identity and relationship with oneself (humanism) while also developing an awareness of social issues and practicing the problem-solving skills necessary for becoming an active member of a democratic society (constructivism).  Essentially, I feel that the methods of humanism ought to be the foundation for education with those of constructivism building off of that foundation.  As with existentialism, I believe that education is most successful when learners have opportunities to understand themselves and develop their own values and then learn to use those values and understandings to create direction and meaning in their individual journeys.  If passion and a sense of identity come first, the rest will follow. That being said, as a teacher, I will take a humanistic approach when it comes to ensuring that my students have plenty of opportunities for self-discovery.  I will try my best not to let my personal beliefs interfere with their learning, and instead leave room for self-directed questioning and learning as well as give my students the freedom to express their own ideas without having to worry about being judged or devalued.  I will treat each student as a unique individual with the right to his/her own thoughts and identity in the hopes that this will give them the intrinsic motivation to follow through with their questions, goals, passions, etcetera.  I believe that learning should be student-driven, not teacher-driven.  I want to develop thinkers and questioners, and more importantly, self-satisfied and self-confident individuals who are unafraid to think and question independently.

The constructivist approach will come into play when I pair the interests of my students with relevant, real-world issues.  If students are comfortable with their own beliefs and values and know to respect those of others even when they differ, then they will hopefully get more out of collaborative work in which they solve problems and think critically.  I hope that my students can learn from each other in the sense that they will each have a unique perspective to bring to the table, allowing the humanistic approach to benefit that of the constructivist approach. Lastly, I believe that it is worth mentioning that while I was reading about the educational theories and contemplating where my personal beliefs fit in, I was deeply reminded of the beliefs of two of my personally most-admired historical figures, transcendentalists Ralph Waldo Emerson and Henry David Thoreau.  Like Rosseau, who believed “the right kind of education puts a child in direct contact with nature without the intermixture of opinions” and that education should be independent of society (Murphy, 2006), Emerson and Thoreau believed in the power of the individual before anything else—including that of institutions.  In my opinion, schools ought to serve as places in which students are provided ongoing opportunities to develop an individual identity and feel safe and respected while doing so.  Simultaneously, schools should give students opportunities to apply their personal interests to real-world situations, as this is where the power of education plays into the greater whole of society.  Finally, if students do not have the chance to discover who they are as individuals, their education will be of lesser value to them and of lesser value to the rest of the world.  Schools do not exist to drill facts into the valuable minds of our students; they should be able to walk away with much more than that, including an identity that will bring them comfort, fulfillment, and purpose in all of life’s journeys.

When I envision my future classroom, I see an organized mess: I see lots of plants, bright colors, student work on display, tables that are easily moved to accommodate different groupings of students for collaborative learning, and shelves full of books and resources for student use and enjoyment.  I believe that the classroom should show signs of life, learning, and positivity.  The classroom should be set up in a flexible manner so that students can maneuver and rearrange as is necessary for their learning goals, and resources and materials should be easily accessible for all students.  The teacher’s desk should not be in the front and center of the room, but in the back and off to the side, for the reason that the teacher will not spend much time at her desk but rather moving about the classroom and working directly with students.  Students should also have a role in designing the classroom, including helping to determine expectations that are put in place to keep it running smoothly and to foster an environment of respect.

It is above all else that I want my classroom climate to be one of respect.  I want my students to feel comfortable expressing who they are, what they think, and how they feel without fear of getting ridiculed.  If my students are supposed to be making meaning out of their lives and learning to become authentic human beings, they need to be able to do so in a safe and comfortable environment.  Furthermore, if they are going to be taking educational risks by challenging themselves and applying knowledge to real-world situations, as a pragmatic philosophy of education implies, then they need to have the confidence to do so.  As the teacher, it will be my job to act as a role model that practices ongoing respect for *all* students.  I will treat each of my students equally and show genuine interest in their lives.  Furthermore, I hope to incorporate team-building activities into to curriculum, particularly in the beginning of the year, and I will have my students engage in collaborative learning activities on a regular—if not daily—basis.  By the end of the year, I want my students to leave my classroom feeling like they have become part of a family that they know will have their backs throughout the rest of their educational journey.  After all, each student is just as vulnerable as the next; they all have their fears and insecurities, and I want my classroom to be a place where those fears and insecurities can vanish so that they can have a chance to be their genuine selves and focusing on learning instead of social anxiety.

I want my students to be intrinsically motivated individuals, and I believe that this type of motivation is best developed when a student is able to participate in an adequate level ofself-directed and student-centered learning.  In order to create an environment that is conducive to this kind of learning, I must give my students freedom and choice as much as possible.  For example, I may have students help design units based on their interests and questions about the world, have them select their own books to read, design their own assignments and assessments and the criteria by which they are to be graded, and to give them plenty of time to reflect and self-evaluate.  I understand that my students won’t be able to choose *everything* that happens in the classroom *all* of the time, and that a certain degree of structure will be necessary, but I want to make sure that I do my best to provide them with opportunities to take ownership over their learning.

Fortunately, English, as with most subjects in the humanities, offers endless possibilities for students to learn more about who they are as individuals while also mastering content standards.  When I teach a work of literature, or a poem, for example, I will continuously be looking for ways to help my students connect with the text and find their own meaning within it.  In English, there is no “right or wrong” answer, so I will challenge my students to think outside the box, and encourage them to approach a text with an open mind, for they never know what they might discover about themselves in the process.  In my personal educational experience, I stumbled across books and poems that touched places in my heart without me even understanding why or how, at least initially. It took me taking the time to be highly introspective to understand why I was so affected by the things I read, and in the process, I learned more about myself. I want my students to take their understanding of certain works of literature and poetry to the next level: I want something to move inside of them, opening a door that allows them to see deeper inside themselves.  Of course, the best way to do this will be by giving them the freedom to explore texts that interest them.  Along similar lines, I hope to use writing as a way to help my students develop more insightful relationship with themselves, and to use it as a means of reflection and comfort.  I understand that not all students will see writing in this way, but it will be my goal to create prompts and assignments that will capture their attention enough to get them to discover just how valuable writing can be—it’s a freeing experience, really.

Each lesson taught within my classroom will have an underlying goal (besides content-related goals) of allowing my students to draw some level of meaning from their own lives while also practicing applying their knowledge and to the “real world.”  Essentially, I want to teach content in ways that require students to take their own values into consideration while looking at the “big picture”, whether that involves them analyzing overarching themes within a work of literature, or even better, considering how those themes are played out in the real world and how they can relate to those themes.  The themes found within literature and poetry often focus on the human condition, i.e., what it means to be human and how humans cope with and react to the events in their lives.  The human condition is, in many ways, the cornerstone of existentialism, and therefore will be a great topic of discussion and exploration within my classroom and learning focuses.  I want my students to further explore their own “human conditions” through not only analyzing texts, but also within their own writing.  Finally, I hope that once my students have had ongoing opportunities to understand themselves on a deeper level, they will be better suited to become active problem solvers in a changing world, particularly through a gained ability to empathize with other humans.  This pragmatic application of understanding will hopefully inspire my students to take what they have discovered about the human condition and go out and “do good” in the world as lifelong learners.

I understand the importance of regular, ongoing authentic assessment as a way to keep track of student understanding.  I plan to use a balance of both formative and summative assessments within my classroom so that I can adjust my teaching methods accordingly.  I will be sure to make the learning goals for each assessment clear from the beginning, so that my students will be able to know *why* they are performing each task, and I will provide them with a scoring criteria at the same time I introduce the assessment (i.e., rubric, analytic grading sheet, etc.).  I would like to allow my students to determine how they will be assessed as much as possible.  For example, I may as them a question such as “how do you think you can best show me that you have learned this material?” and then facilitate a class-wide brainstorming session.  If for whatever reason students can’t design their own assessment format (as I realize some structure and guidance may be necessary), I might provide them with a handful of different options and allow them to choose from the list with the hope that it will allow for some differentiation and that each student has the opportunity to demonstrate their understanding in a way that is most conducive to their individual strength or learning style.  Finally, with each assessment, I will offer timely teacher feedback as well as opportunities for peer feedback and self-reflection, and students will more often than not have the chance to re-do any work that they are unsatisfied with for full-credit.  I believe that learning is a reflective process, and would rather give my students the opportunity to improve their work than to expect “perfection” on the first attempt.

Fortunately, my time as an undergraduate student in the field of education has made me more confident in my abilities to use technology in the classroom in meaningful ways.  When I first started out as a teacher in training, I was a bit doubtful of the positive impact that technology can have on a classroom, particularly in the way of being a distraction and taking away from students’ connections to and appreciation for the “natural” world.  However, I have since come to believe that technology can be a very valuable tool in the classroom when used in balance with other teaching tools and methods.  For example, I can easily envision myself having my students use laptops or iPads as vehicles for bringing the outside world into the classroom.  Since I want my students to be able to look at “the big picture” and apply their knowledge to the world as a whole, I think that it is important that they have the means to further explore the world that exists outside the walls of the classroom, school, community, state, and even country.  There are so many excellent Web 2.0 tools that students can use for communicating, sharing, collaborating, designing, creating, exploring, etc. that I feel it would be a shame to overlook them.  Furthermore, it is clear that we are entering a digital age, and it is my responsibility to prepare my students to be competent and well-informed digital citizens for this reason.  If I want them to be able to apply their skills in a changing world, technology integration will be a necessity in the classroom.

I believe that my most significant role as a teacher will be that of a positive role model and facilitator of learning.  Aforementioned, as a role model, it is my job to demonstrate empathy and respect on a regular basis.  In terms of teaching methods, I do not believe in the teacher as a “giver of knowledge”; instead, I feel that the teacher’s role is to bring to the forefront the questions that students will explore in their learning.  As a proponent of student-centered learning rather than of teacher-centered learning, it is only right in my mind that the teacher opens the doors to the questions that will motivate students to learn more about themselves, the world, and their role as lifelong learners in the grand scheme of things.  In my mind, it is less likely that my students will become intrinsically motivated learners if I am simply handing them all the “answers”; after all it, it is more important that they develop the skills necessary to become active thinkers and problem solvers throughout the continuation of their lives.  If they aren’t given the opportunity to think for themselves as adolescents, how else are they going to move forward as dynamic, innovative, and self-motivated individuals?  Lastly, I envision my leadership style in the classroom to resemble that of a coach as well as a facilitator.  The best coach I ever had in eight years of competitive running used methods that closely modeled a quote by Olympic athlete Wilma Rudolph: “Everything you need is already inside.”  This coach brought me to believe that I was capable of achieving everything I always dreamed of on the track, and never pinned my success as a result of his coaching; he simply believed that his coaching had the ability to bring out the best in me, not turn me into someone or something that I already wasn’t. Instead, he gave me my workouts, watched closely as I ran them, provided feedback and made adjustments accordingly, and when it came time for me to race, I always knew where to find him: standing alone on the final 100-meter stretch of track where he knew I was most likely to die out, giving me words of encouragement that he knew I would respond to because he took the time to get to know me as an athlete and as a person.  I hope to practice similar strategies as a teacher by “coaching” my students to success in an individualized, responsive manner that keeps the power, drive, and credit in the student’s hands—not my own.

Finally, throughout my time at UMF, I have learned more than anything that the education system is constantly changing, and that teachers and students are consistently faced with new challenges and stipulations. The student demographics found within American schools are becoming more diverse between in influx of ELL students, multicultural students, students with behavioral and emotional disorders, students with learning disabilities, students with varying gender identities, and students coming from poverty-stricken homes. Furthermore, standardized, high-stakes testing has led to increased pressure to perform, and I have witnessed in-service teachers become jaded as a result of such pressure. I have heard teachers complain of not having the autonomy to teach in the way that they want to, and, some teachers, particularly those who are family friends or teachers that I have had in the past, have even questioned my decision to enter the profession. There is nothing more disheartening than hearing such pessimistic things from people who are teachers themselves. I have made a conscious decision to not let their opinions influence me in negative ways. Instead, I am determined to put my best foot forward with enthusiasm, even in the face of great challenge. I will be entering the teaching profession at a pivotal time in history, and I hope that this will work to my advantage. Proficiency-based instruction and assessment will be a norm for me, and I am glad that this shift towards more measurable, ongoing, and differentiated assessment is happening. Overall, I feel that I am prepared to establish my own pedagogy while entering a challenging by worthwhile profession.

In conclusion, my biggest goal as a future educator is to inspire and bring out the best in others, whether they are my students or colleagues.  I hope to be able to promote student-centered learning through success within my own classroom, and to be an active member in the school community and district by attending meetings and events where I can learn from other teachers as well as share my own ideas and practices.  I hope to bring positivity, optimism, and a progress-oriented vision to my school and district that is driven by my existentialist and pragmatic ideals. Teaching, like learning, is a journey, and it is a journey that I am prepared for and excited to take on.